

Ten Tips For The Alzheimer's Caregiver

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Get a diagnosis as early as possible. Alzheimer symptoms may appear gradually, and the person will seem physically healthy, so it may be hard to tell they are ill. Frequently, both the individual and family members deny there's a problem because the possibility of Alzheimer's can be so frightening. But some symptoms of dementia can be reversed with a physician's care, depending on the cause. Even if the diagnosis is "probable" Alzheimer's, help is available. The sooner you know what you're dealing with, the more you can plan for the future and manage the present.

Do legal and financial planning. Consult an attorney on such planning tools as: power of attorney, to empower you to act on the individual's behalf; a will; a living trust, to appoint a trustee to manage the individual's assets; and a living will, to provide direction on how to make future medical decisions. Other topics include guardianship, property ownership or taxes. Financial planning also is essential, since expenses could include in-home assistance, nursing home and hospice care. As much as possible, involve the person with Alzheimer's disease in the planning.

Educate yourself on caregiving. Alzheimer's disease has stages of progression, requiring different caregiving skills and capabilities. Certain techniques can enable you to address many of the behavioral symptoms of Alzheimer's disease to help both the individual, and you as caregiver. Prevention techniques also are important, such as locking away medications so the individual can't repeat doses, or hiding door locks so they can't wander away. There is a wealth of information available through the Alzheimer's Association to help you learn how to ensure quality care, and maximize the quality of life of your loved one.

Know what resources are available to help you. Caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease is often called "the 36-hour day." For your own well-being and that of your loved one, you should know what resources are available to supplement your care. In-home assistance, visiting nurses and Meals-on-Wheels are just some of the community services you could call on.

Get help. Trying to do it all yourself will exhaust you; you might even wind up sick yourself. The support of family and friends can be an enormous help; if they do not readily offer assistance, tell them you need their involvement. Use the community services available to you. And get into a support group; knowing you're not alone, learning from others, and accessing resources will enable you to better care for your loved one, and lessen your own fatigue.

Take care of yourself. It's easy for Alzheimer caregivers to devote themselves totally to their loved ones and neglect their own needs. Don't fall into that trap. By using available resources, you can pay more attention to yourself: watch your diet, exercise and get enough rest. Respite services are increasingly available; use them to take time off for shopping, a movie or a visit with family and friends.

Manage your stress level. Stress can manifest itself physically (blurred vision, digestive problems, high blood pressure), emotionally, (depression, frustration, loss of self-esteem) or behaviorally (irritability, lack of concentration, loss of appetite). Sometimes caregivers turn to alcohol or drugs to ease their stress. Be alert to your own stress symptoms and get help.

Learn to let go. People are often reluctant to turn caregiving for the loved one over to others, even when that decision is in the best interest of both the person with Alzheimer's and the caregiver. Eventually, though, this difficult decision must be made. The Alzheimer's Association's booklet, "Family Guide for Alzheimer Care in Residential Setting," provides guidelines on how to determine which facility will provide the best environment and meet your caregiving requirements.

Be realistic. Until there is a treatment or cure, the progression of Alzheimer's disease is certain and inescapable. Some aspects of the caregiving process you can control, and others you can't. Grieve for the loss of your loved one, your loss of companionship and the future you had dreamed of. But then enjoy your good memories, live for each day and get on with your life.

Give yourself credit, not guilt. You're human. You occasionally lose patience and do or say things you may regret. You can't provide all the care you'd like to. At times, you need others to care for your loved one, because you're not up to it. You do the best you can. Give yourself credit. Being a devoted Alzheimer caregiver is not something to feel guilty about; instead consider that your loved one needs you and you're there. That's something you can be proud of.

**Source: Alzheimer's Association, Cleveland Area Chapter,
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